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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is designed to help parents serve as advocates for the adoption of gifted programs in their local school districts. Rebuttals are offered to six myths about gifted students which commonly are used to deny gifted programs. Step-by-step methods for two strategies for obtaining gifted programs are presented: working from the top down (convincing the board of education and the superintendent that a gifted program is needed) and working from the bottom up (working with a teacher in the local school who is committed to gifted education). Suggestions are also given for protecting the program once it has been established and for organizing a parent advocacy group. (DC)

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ILLINOIS COUNCIL FOR THE GIFTED

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PARENTS, POWER, POLITICS AND YOUR GIFTED CHILD

AN ORGANIZING MANUAL

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Local gifted advocacy means the difference between a gifted program in the neighborhood school or no program in the neighborhood school. After you've helped get the gifted money bill passed in the state legislature (see the ICG pamphlet *"State Gifted Advocacy: A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Coordinators")* it is time to turn to the local level and obtain the best gifted program for the state funds.

The first fact which a gifted advocate must realize is that *KNOWLEDGE IS POWER*. The more you know about the district the better. Find out the names of all local school district personnel and their formal titles. You must find out who is in charge of the local program (if one exists). Usually this task is or can be assigned to the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum. Also become very well read in gifted education. The *ICG HANDBOOK* is a good beginning. Unless you are well read and can intelligently argue against the myths which are used to deny gifted programs you will lose before you talk for five minutes. Remember, *KNOWLEDGE IS POWER*.

There are many myths circulating about gifted children and giftedness. Everyone seems to have an opinion. For many people giftedness is an emotional issue. Let's look at some of the myths out in the public.

MYTH #1 *We believe that "all children are gifted."*

FACT: Just ask any parent possessed with a normal amount of love if they don't regard their child as being gifted. How quickly they can snow you with "objective evidence" to prove it! All children offer delightful satisfaction to their parents or other adults when they produce new words or new concepts or when they demonstrate new skill in physical, mental, or aesthetic accomplishments. The key word in answering the question--if there is an answer to the question--is the matter of "degree." Some children produce actual evidence of giftedness that forecasts unusual accomplishments in the future, while others show potential that is extraordinary for their age.

MYTH #2 Gifted students, already blessed with more than their share of skills and talents, do not need our concern.

FACT: We do not ignore the special needs of those children who are handicapped. Nor should we neglect the special needs of those students labeled as gifted. Rather, we should look upon them as a natural resource to be nurtured now to assure the fulfillment of their potential in the future.

MYTH #3 Gifted students are the "cream" of the academic crop, and all of us know that cream always rises to the top.

FACT: Admittedly, some gifted students meet classroom requirements easily, complete their work on or ahead of time, and seemingly conform to everyone's expectations--particularly those of teachers and classmates. However, these students may not reach their own potential. Rather than feel challenged, some of these bright youngsters look for and find a comfortable niche in the existent curriculum. This snug niche allows them to suppress their natural academic brightness or creative abilities--which is a cream turned sour!

MYTH #4 A good program for gifted students is good for all students.

FACT: Simply, the answer is "no." If the program were good for all students, it would not be good for gifted students, and for these reasons. Bright children need work with content and ideas keyed to their intellectual level. If these children are to improve their specialized talents, they will need instructional assistance that keeps pace with their abilities. Other children cannot keep up with their gifted classmates who, if the program is keyed to their potential, will increasingly depart from the norm in their degree of attainment. Research shows that when a program for all children is geared to the norm, it limits the potential of those students who are markedly different--that is, who are gifted as well as those who are handicapped.

MYTH #5 We wouldn't need a special program for gifted students if classroom teachers were doing their job.

FACT: Like other special populations in the school system, gifted students need teachers trained to serve their needs. In most instances, classroom teachers are generalists, lacking the specialized preparation for working with these students. All we should really expect of "regular" teachers is for them to find alternatives for working with the gifted and to guide these bright youngsters toward these alternatives. Most of all, we should never brand teachers as failures because they cannot be all things to all children.

MYTH #6 Bright children and youth can take care of themselves, can achieve at a superior level without special assistance, and can make it on their own.

FACT: Research negates this myth on several counts. Unless they receive special training, most teachers do not identify with any high degree of accuracy those students who are gifted, bright, talented, or creative. Nor does the group-testing technique necessarily reveal these gifted children. Research has also shown that many gifted students underachieve. They perform at a level far below their intellectual potential. This loss is particularly critical amoung students in minority groups where environment may stifle their potential talents. Although academic achievements may set them apart from others, gifted children still share many of the same basic needs as their peers. These needs include understanding, self-esteem, a sense of worthy accomplishment, independence, and love. If these needs are not met, gifted children--just as any other children--may suffer from problems of anxiety and insecurity, even loneliness. The higher the capability of these students, the greater may be their problems of adjustment to the world around them.

Parents need to have answers to these commonly held beliefs so that they can respond to them. As for educating an elite, we've done it for years for athletes. Gifted children are not making it on their own. Citing drop-out rates from recent studies can be convincing: forty-five percent underachieve; fifteen percent drop out. In 1972, the U.S. Office of Education Report on the Gifted and Talented stated that:..."Research on large-scale studies (has) concluded that gifted and talented children are disadvantaged and handicapped in the usual school situation. The gifted are the most retarded group in the schools. The boredom that results from discrepancies between the child's knowledge and the school's offerings leads us to underachievement and behavior disorders affecting self and others. Early identification would enable schools to prevent rather than to attempt later on to cure underachievement. Further, there is evidence that efforts later on are wasted, as underachievement patterns are so strongly set by then."

Gifted children have become increasingly vulnerable to boredom and disinterest in school curriculum in the last decade. The "Back to Basics" trend has had the effect of increasing time spent in classrooms on reading, writing, and arithmetic--often to the almost total neglect of the sciences, social studies, and the arts.

The Crossroads of Gaining Gifted Programs

At this point you have two ways to proceed to obtain a gifted program in your district. I will describe both of the systems. The first system is:

WORK FROM THE TOP DOWN

In the "work from the top down" system, you must begin at the Board of Education-Superintendent level. At this point you must "sell" both of these on the idea that the Gifted Program would be good for the district. Be polite but be firm. Remember that you are seeking cooperation not confrontation. The goal here is to educate both groups. The Board of Education has so many problems today that they may not be anti-gifted but just neutral on the issue. Perhaps your talking will enable them to start the ball rolling on the issue

of gifted education. At any rate, be prepared to discuss and promote the idea that it would benefit the district if it provided a Gifted Program.

The first major goal is to obtain a board statement supporting the concept of gifted education for the district. This one statement will indicate to other district staff that their support of the gifted program is required by the district. The following is a sample statement:

District _____ recognizes the right of all students to a program of educational experiences which provides opportunities for development to the full limit of their capabilities. The school district also recognizes that gifted students have exceptional and unique educational needs, that these students exist in all ethnic, religious, and varied economic groups, and that these students represent a vast and largely untapped resource to society. Therefore, District _____ has developed a program known as (Name of Program) which:

1. *Identifies gifted and talented students.*
2. *Provides a program of experiences which are substantially different from the regular school program. This program is based upon the unique needs of the gifted and talented students.*

The main paragraph above is quoted verbatim (with the addition of the word *gifted*) directly from the beginning of the School Code of Illinois, the set of policies by which all school districts must operate. Anyone who objects to the set of policies by which all public school districts must operate will find it very embarrassing to be told that they have just criticized the School Code of Illinois.

The next step is for you to "volunteer" to be on the district's new Gifted Education Committee (advisory council). Even if you don't yet have the board statement, get this committee started. As a member of this committee you can use your knowledge to positively influence others that gifted education is crucial in the district. The following is a sample list of people to be on that committee:

Superintendent (vital to selling rest of board on
Board member committee recommendations)
You
1 or 2 more pro-gifted parents (maybe a friend)
Teacher (who might end up teaching in the program)
Teacher (" " " " " " " ")
Businessperson (banker, lawyer, doctor--professionals to support gifted education.
Businessperson
Principal (pro-gifted or interested so you gain support from the program in local buildings.
Principal

This committee builds school/community support for the new program and gains you other cooperative voices to sell the program which you and they have developed. As they "buy into" the issue of gifted education your enthusiasm wears off onto them and they in turn "sell" the program, increasing your "selling."

At the first meeting adopt a schedule of meetings and a date for a final report from the committee. Below is a sample schedule:

September:	form group
October:	first meeting
January:	final report
February:	Board of Education passes report
March:	gifted funding applied for
July 1:	gifted funding begins
September 1:	gifted program begins.

If you push gifted and push cooperation you should be able to implement a gifted program in one year from the formation of the committee. The key is selling people on gifted education along the way. I'll talk about parent groups later in this pamphlet.

You now have a supportive board and a supportive superintendent. Now what? You must get a competent gifted coordinator. Not all peple should teach gifted students or coordinate gifted programs. GOOD COORDINATORS GOOD PROGRAMS. Again, *KNOWLEDGE IS POWER*. A good coordinator should:

(1) Be committed to gifted education.
(2) Have taught gifted students at least 3 years.
(3) Have a course in Administration of Gifted Ed.
(4) Have graduate hours (at least 9) in Gifted Ed.
(5) Be enthusiastic.
(6) Have an awful lot of energy. It will take a lot of work to implement a gifted program.

Although most districts will not let you participate in the selection process, if you have done your homework in preparing the superintendent and the board on what a coordinator should be for the program (which you jointly wrote), you should have a competent coordinator as a result. *KNOWLEDGE*, again, *IS POWER*.

If you already have a coordinator, you must become that person's best friend. Many coordinators are well trained and quite competent, but many coordinators have been given the job without direction or training and you may know more about gifted education than he/she does. With this type of coordinator you must reinforce his or her ego and provide the person with knowledge of other programs and what should/could be done with the program which they have inherited or acquired. A non-hostile, positive but firm relationship is needed. By providing information and ideas and writing letters to that person's superior every time he/she does something right, you are reinforcing the positive relationship and promoting the program.

You now have a committed board, superintendent, and coordinator, so now you need to make sure that the local principal and teachers will buy into the program and guarantee that the excellent program exists in the local building. Most district personnel will realize that if the board and the superintendent want it they also should want it but that isn't necessarily so. You again must "sell" unless you were smart and included a teacher and the principal from your local building on that district committee. If you did, they and you now can together "sell" the rest of the building that that excellent gifted program is here to stay.

WORK FROM THE BOTTOM UP

This is by far the harder of the two systems because you will have to convince and persuade more people. Working from the top uses the power chain of a system to your advantage but it can be done from the bottom up.

The first step is to find a teacher in your local school committed to the idea of gifted education, then help him or her. Become a room parent, do volunteer work or whatever the teacher needs to free him or her up to work with the gifted students. Next begin your letter writing campaign. Write glowing notes about what the

teacher is doing for gifted kids. Carbon copy these notes to the principal, superintendent, and board president. Make everyone aware of the excellent job.

Next you must sell the principal. Become his/her friend and sell the person on the idea that special activities and free time for the teachers to do them (for gifted kids) needs to be built into the present school day. Becoming the principal's friend is not very easy but here are some suggestions.

(1) Make an appointment and meet the principal. Only talk over positive aspects of gifted education and the program which may exist. Write a letter to the superintendent saying how impressed you are with the principal.

(2) Ask for a building committee to be formed. Of course you will volunteer to be on it. This gives you more time to become friendly with the principal.

(3) Visit school often--2 to 3 times a month. Drop in and chat informally with the principal.

(4) After he/she sees you around, knows your interest in the school, and always sees you as a positive parent, begin the sell of "we need more for the gifted students in the school." Start with a soft sell and end with a hard sell.

Take other parents with you (especially fathers--for some reason principals listen better when talking to Dad). Sell them that it is their duty. For every concession which you do win, send a memo to the superintendent and the board president about the excellent program which is developing at the school under the leadership of Principal X. Set goals for yourself and your group, then go out and accomplish them. Do not give up. It may take two years but eventually you will get cooperation. Using this same system, next persuade the superintendent to get state gifted funding to implement your local school program throughout the district, persuade the board to approve it, and finally get a District Committee. Oh, and don't forget to elect pro-gifted board members. By always reinforcing positive constructive gestures by the school, you will eventually move the mountain of neutrality or indecision on gifted education.

PROTECTING THE GIFTED PROGRAM

A major problem that happens is that after a parents group gets a program they become complacent, Gifted advocates can never become complacent or one day personnel may

change, budget cuts may happen, and you may find the district is dissolving the gifted program.

There are two ways to protect the gifted program. (1) *WRITE LETTERS.* Every year you and the other parents in the program should write letters to the principal, superintendent and board supporting the fact that they had the foresight to have a gifted program. (Usually they only hear complaints.) They will appreciate your letters and you will gain some allies.
(2) *ELECT BOARD MEMBERS.* To really guarantee a long term commitment you must have supportive board members. The principal, teachers, coordinator or the superintendent may leave but the program won't because the board commitment is there; besides, board members cannot be impeached or removed in Illinois so elect those who are supportive of gifted education.

Your county clerk has election information and names of candidates up for election. A good technique is to endorse candidates for school board if you cannot get someone to run for the board. Endorsement is a process by which your group invites all candidates to speak to your group about their views on gifted education. Prepare a list of questions which you would like answered at the meeting and send it to them. Ask these and other questions at the meeting. Decide which candidate(s) to support, let them know, and help them campaign. When the chips are down and that vote is needed to protect or promote the gifted program, he or she "owes" you a debt.

Finally visit the program. Is it doing what it set out to do? Ask for the year end evaluation and read it. Are the students getting their money's worth? Keep the Gifted Committee organized to suggest expansion of and improvements to the program (also keeping the people involved and committed). This type of committee can also be very useful in changing a presently poor program since it promotes new ideas and concepts for the program and gives you a voice and a place from which to express your opinions on that change.

ORGANIZING YOUR PARENT GROUP

Organizing parents is very difficult in gifted education. First, many parents don't want to admit they have a gifted child. Secondly, its hard to find out who the other parents of gifted children are. It's not that the district won't tell you but that legally they have to

protect themselves. The organizing parent must resort to different means to start the organization. First, if your school has a program and your child is in it, ask your child to help you with naming all of the students as a start. Friends who have gifted children are great people to begin with. Finally, advertise--get an article in the local paper, community calendar, on the local radio station, or put up posters. Don't expect a large crowd this time. It's better to use a library or community room rather than a school. Use a small room so that if you have few people you look big. If possible get a speaker who will talk about gifted education. (Call on the ICG Speakers Bureau.) After the speaker, pass out cards to begin the membership file for the new organization. *KNOWLEDGE IS POWER*, so inform the group of the status of the program. Set goals for the group and the next meeting date. Use the file cards to send out notices for the next meeting and ask each person to bring a friend. Remind them with a phone call 2 days prior to the meeting. Use the local TV/radio/newspaper and put up posters. At the second meeting, get cards to the new faces. Provide coffee and rolls for relaxation--at this meeting you begin committee formation:

NEWSLETTER-keeps people informed of meetings
MEMBERSHIP-gets new members, keeps card file
LEGISLATIVE-writes legislators to support gifted bills
ADVOCACY-persuades local district to do more for gifted.

Form committees according to people's interests. Each group develops goals and a list of its members. A temporary chairperson leads the group and ends the meeting. Prior to 3rd meeting meet with the temporary chairpersons to plan. Attract more membership with a speaker. Most new parents groups meet 4 times a year in mass with a presentation and meet monthly with the leadership (committee chairpersons) to plan strategy. Above all, be enthusiastic and "sell" the fact that you <u>will</u> accomplish gifted education in the district. This will keep others involved and help gain your goal.

AT THIS POINT ALL YOU HAVE LEFT IS A LOT OF HARD WORK TO ACCOMPLISH BOTH THE VIABLE PARENTS GROUP AND AN EXCELLENT GIFTED PROGRAM IN THE LOCAL DISTRICT. DON'T EVER GIVE UP! THE ICG IS ALWAYS THERE TO HELP AND BESIDES, THE LACK OF A PROGRAM WON'T HURT YOU, <u>IT WILL ONLY HARM YOUR CHILD</u>. JUST REMEMBER THAT THE NEXT TIME THAT SOMEONE SAYS "WE CAN'T AFFORD TO EDUCATE THE GIFTED."